

Frequently Asked Questions

Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)¹

Overview of VR and Pre-ETS

What is Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)?

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a critical service provided by the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) at the Tennessee Department of Human Services to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving competitive integrated employment. VR services are designed to assist individuals in reaching their full potential as active participants in Tennessee's workforce, economy, and communities. These services are tailored to assist individuals in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining employment that aligns with their abilities, skills, and interests.

What are Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)?

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) are offered through the VR program and are available to students with disabilities, a 504 plan, or medication documentation between the ages of 14 and 22. These services focus on providing foundational skills and experiences to help students successfully transition from school to employment or postsecondary education. Pre-ETS are offered regardless of a student's eligibility for VR services to eligible students with an individualized plan for employment (IPE). These services provide students with a broad range of opportunities, including:

- **Job Exploration Counseling:** Helping students learn about potential careers and assess their interests and skills.
- **Work-Based Learning Experiences:** Providing hands-on, real-world work opportunities to build job readiness skills that will help students connect school experiences to real-life work activities and future career opportunities.
- **Postsecondary Education Counseling:** Assisting students in exploring different types of postsecondary education, training, and apprenticeship programs.
- **Workplace Readiness Training:** Teaching essential skills like communication, time management, teamwork, job-seeking skills, and employer expectations.
- **Self-Advocacy Instruction:** Empowering students to understand their rights and advocate for themselves in school, work, and community settings.

¹ This resource was developed in collaboration with the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) at the Tennessee Department of Human Services and the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) to support coordinated transition planning and improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

How do Pre-ETS and VR help students achieve their employment goals?

Through Pre-ETS, students begin building critical workplace skills while still in school, allowing them to explore career options and prepare for postsecondary education and the workforce. These services are free of charge and are provided in partnership with local educational agencies (LEAs), transition coordinators, special education teams, and community-based rehabilitation providers (CRPs). By offering these services while students are still enrolled in school, VR aims to help ensure a smoother transition to adulthood, equipping students with disabilities to successfully navigate the demands of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Students become familiar, at an earlier age, with the various individualized services VR can provide to help them achieve their career goals. By applying to receive VR services under an IPE 18-24 months before exiting high school, students are better equipped to experience a seamless transition. This collaborative, comprehensive approach to vocational rehabilitation empowers students with the tools they need to succeed in competitive, integrated employment opportunities.

Eligibility for VR and Pre-ETS

Who is eligible for Pre-ETS?

[Pre-ETS is available to all students with disabilities](#) between 14 and 22 years of age who meet the requirements below:

- Have a documented disability (via an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 plan, ***or*** physician's note).
- Are currently enrolled in a school program (including public, private, charter, or homeschool) and have not graduated or are participating in an extended transition program.

Who is eligible for VR services?

A [determination of VR program eligibility](#) is based on the following:

- The person has a physical, mental, or sensory impairment that results in a substantial barrier to employment;
- The person is not able to obtain or retain employment without receiving VR services. VR services are required to prepare for, secure, retain or regain employment consistent with the person's strengths, abilities, capabilities, interest, and informed choice; and
- The person can benefit from VR services in terms of an employment outcome, meaning, the person is able to and chooses to be employed.

How can students receive Pre-ETS?

There are two ways students can receive Pre-ETS:

1. Direct Pre-ETS referral (without applying for VR services under an Individualized Plan for Employment). ***This process is much simpler and quicker, allowing students to start accessing services sooner.***
 - Schools can directly refer students with a disability (*see above requirements*) to Pre-ETS using a short referral form provided by the local VR office or through a community rehabilitation provider (CRP).
 - Students do not need to be determined eligible for VR or complete an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).
2. Through the VR application (for students interested in receiving VR services to help them achieve their career goals, beyond Pre-ETS). ***This process streamlines services, providing continuous support from Pre-ETS to broader VR services without interruption.***
 - If a student is interested in receiving both Pre-ETS **and** VR services, it is recommended to complete the full VR application process.

Can students with 504 Plans or medical conditions apply for VR or Pre-ETS?

Yes, a 504 Plan, medical documentation, or other proof of a disability is sufficient to access Pre-ETS. Eligibility for VR services will be determined by VR staff based on how the disability impacts employment.

Can students who are already employed receive VR or Pre-ETS services?

Yes, students who are already employed may still be eligible for VR or Pre-ETS services, especially if they require assistance with improving their job skills, transitioning to a different job, or retaining employment in competitive integrated settings. These services can support career advancement and long-term employment success.

What if I refer a student and they are found ineligible for VR services?

- **Pre-ETS Availability:** Even if a student is found ineligible for VR services, they are still eligible for Pre-ETS services.
- **Notification Process:** If a student is determined to be ineligible for VR services, the VR office will notify the student and/or their parent/guardian. This notification will include a clear explanation of the decision, outlining the specific reasons for ineligibility, some additional resources, and any next steps.
- **Alternative Resources and Next Steps for Local Education Agencies (LEAs):** LEAs should continue to support students by collaborating with **community providers** or utilizing resources available through **IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)** or **Section 504**. These laws provide services and supports that can assist with transition planning and career readiness. Additionally, LEAs can guide students toward other local services, non-profit organizations, or state programs focused on employment.

Enrollment Process

How can a student enroll in VR or Pre-ETS?

1. Make a Referral

- Anyone can refer a student to VR: educators, transition professionals, school counselors, parents, the student, or community providers.
- Referrals can be made through the [TDHS website](#) or by contacting the local VR office.

2. Schedule an Intake Appointment

- A VR team member will schedule an in-person or virtual intake to discuss the student’s interests, needs, and goals. The student must be included in the appointment.
- The student or LEA with consent from the student/parent must provide documentation of the disability (IEP, 504 plan, medical records/physician note, evaluations).

3. Eligibility Determination

- The VR counselor reviews the documentation to determine if the student meets the federal and state criteria for VR services.
- If eligible, the student will work with the counselor to develop an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE), which outlines the specific services and supports needed to achieve their career goals.

Is it the same process to apply for VR and Pre-ETS?

Service	Full VR Application	Eligibility Determination	Availability in School	Permission Slip	Age Range
Pre-ETS	✗	✗	✓	✓	14-22 years
VR	✓	✓	✓	✗	14+ years (recommended 18-24 months before exiting high school)

Is there a waiting list for VR services in Tennessee?

No, Tennessee’s VR program does not operate under an order of selection. This means that all eligible individuals can receive VR services without being placed on a waiting list. Previously, Tennessee had an order of selection system in place, which prioritized services for individuals with the most significant disabilities due to limited resources. However, the state has since moved away from this approach to ensure that all eligible individuals have access to the necessary services.

Can a student reapply for VR services if they were previously denied?

Yes, students can reapply for VR services if their circumstances change. If a student was previously found ineligible, they can reapply if their disability or needs have changed. It’s important to keep VR

staff updated on any changes in the student's situation to ensure they receive the appropriate support.

Service Coordination

How are services coordinated between LEAs and VR?

In Tennessee, VR works closely with LEAs to coordinate transition services for students with disabilities. By working together, VR and LEAs help students access vocational training, employment readiness programs, and other essential services that promote long-term success.

- **Transition School to Work (TSW):** Tennessee VR and LEAs collaborate with TSW teams across the state. These teams are responsible for helping students with disabilities transition from school to the workforce. They facilitate VR referrals, assist in the development of employment goals, and connect students with necessary services and resources.
- **Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs):** CRPs play a key role in the transition process by supporting students in accessing Pre-ETS, including job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, postsecondary education counseling, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy.
- **Pre-ETS:** Through an interagency agreement, Tennessee VR and the Tennessee Department of Education ensure that students with disabilities have access to Pre-ETS, which are provided starting at age 14. These services are available to eligible students even if VR services are not yet in place.
- **IEP and IPE Coordination:** While LEAs are responsible for developing the student's IEP, VR works in coordination with the LEA to ensure that the IPE is aligned with the student's educational and employment goals. VR staff can participate in IEP meetings to ensure that transition planning and vocational goals are incorporated.
- **Collaboration with Families and Community Partners:** VR and LEAs involve families throughout the transition process, ensuring that parents and guardians are informed and engaged. Additionally, community partners, such as CRPs, provide valuable resources and support, helping to bridge gaps and ensure students have access to the services they need.

Additional Questions to Consider for Successful Transition Planning

Should I refer students to VR during high school or wait until they graduate?

It is best to refer students to VR during high school rather than waiting until graduation. The advantages of referring during high school include:

- **Time to Develop an IPE:** Early referral gives students time to develop an IPE, which is different from the IEP. The IPE focuses specifically on employment goals and the steps

needed to achieve them, helping prepare students to achieve their career goals after graduation.

- **Smooth Transition:** Referring students to VR while in school allows for a smoother transition to post-secondary education, employment, or independent living, as services are already in place.
- **Maximizing Resources:** By referring early, students can access valuable resources like work-based learning experiences or assistive technology, which can help them achieve their transition goals before graduation.
- **Avoiding Delays:** Referring early can help avoid delays in receiving services after graduation, ensuring continuous support and preventing potential gaps in services.

When should VR be invited to an IEP meeting?

VR should be invited to an IEP meeting when the student and/or their representative or conservator is ready to start creating a plan to achieve their career goals. The timing may vary based on the student's individualized needs and the services required to meet their employment objective. Generally, students should apply for VR services 18 to 24 months before they plan to exit high school. This timeframe allows for completing the VR application, determining eligibility, collaborating with the VR counselor to develop an IPE, and starting services outlined in the IPE before high school graduation. If VR is unable to attend the IEP meeting, the IEP team should refer to the referral process outlined above.

What kind of support can families expect during the transition process?

VR and LEAs actively involve families, providing support and information throughout the process. Families are encouraged to attend meetings, including the IEP and IPE meetings, to help ensure that their child's goals are clearly defined and supported. VR counselors can also guide families in understanding their child's rights, available services, and available community resources.

Are there transportation services available for VR-eligible students who need help commuting to work?

Yes, VR can assist with transportation-related services if transportation is a barrier to employment access. VR staff will work with students and families to identify potential solutions, such as travel training, access to public transportation, or reimbursement for transportation costs.

Are VR services available for students planning to attend college or training programs out of state?

Yes, VR can support students who plan to attend college or training programs out of state. However, there are a few important things to keep in mind:

- VR services are typically provided by the state VR agency in the student's home state. If the student attends school out of state, they may still receive services through their home state's VR agency while enrolled in the out-of-state program.
- Students may need to coordinate with both their home state's VR agency and the VR agency in the state where they will be attending school. This coordination ensures that the student

receives the necessary support, such as assistive technology, transportation, or other vocational services.

- Eligibility for VR services is generally determined by the student's home state's VR criteria. Even if a student is attending school in another state, they may still qualify for services based on the rules in their home state.
- The funding for services may vary depending on the state. Some services may be covered by the home state's VR program, while others might be provided by the out-of-state VR agency, depending on the specifics of the case.

Additional Information and Resources

Contact Information

For direct assistance, speak with a live VR representative by calling: 1 (833) 772-8347.

Resources for Educators, Parents, and Students

[A Guide for Collaboration Among State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and Education Partners](#)

[A Guide to Pre-Employment Transition Services in Tennessee](#)

[Pre-Employment Transition Services Overview](#)

[Tennessee Disability Pathfinder](#)

[Transition School to Work Program](#)

[TransitionTN](#)

[Virtual Pre-Employment Transition Services](#)

[Vocational Rehabilitation Referral](#)